Meet the net zero neighbours; This tiny Toronto group has big ambitions to change the way we think - and talk - about climate change

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Body

It shot up almost without notice.

Suddenly it was there, intruding on my morning walk with the dog. ESSO. Red letters, in a blue oval, on a white sign. The Esso station, a gas station, arose without remark. Upon opening, it will join around 900 other gas stations in Toronto.

In a time spectacularly marked by climate impacts - fires and floods in BC and around the world, the melting Arctic, the spectre of millions of climate refugees - the opening of a new Esso station hardly garners a raised eyebrow. Certainly not a protest. I'm guilty. I didn't meet the unveiling of the Esso sign with a protest placard because it didn't occur to me, and I've studied and advocated for climate action for 25 years. There was an old gas station there before and so a new one going in is routine. Ordinary. The ordinary might do us in.

It isn't that people don't know or care about climate change. In a UN-sponsored poll released in January 2021, three in four Canadians agreed climate change is an emergency. And yet we are far from even a serious start on our journey to a low carbon country. Canadians' per capita emissions rank fifth highest in the world, and our national emissions have increased since signing the Paris Agreement in 2015 - an inglorious honour we alone hold in the G7. Clearly, there's much work to do. But it's not easy.

Our group began with six neighbours sitting around a dining room table, socializing and strategizing a plan to engage our neighbourhood on climate change - the NetZero committee for the Harbord Village Residents Association. Our tiny group has big ambitions, envisioning neighbours getting behind a push to transform their houses and transportation choices in line with Toronto's goal to be a net zero city by 2050. We've had great discussions, done some interesting projects, and built a nice community, but, at times, the work is frustratingly slow.

We don't have a lot of levers to pull. We've done research on home renovation options and are exploring bulk buy possibilities. We've talked with energy audit specialists and organized an e-bike test drive event. We launched a survey to see what our neighbours are interested in doing and run webinars to get the word out about heat pumps and government home retrofit funding programs. We're developing a pilot project around neighbourhood charging stations. We received a small grant from The Atmospheric Fund, and connected with Transform TO about collaborating with other neighbourhoods. We're trying many different ways to motivate our neighbours to act.

We talk a lot about the details of flyers and email blasts.

The inertia of non-choices

Your furnace goes out and you call the HVAC repair service. The technician assumes you want another gas furnace because that's what people usually want and it's what they always install. You order a gas furnace because that's what was there before and it's what's on offer. No one thinks very much about this.

But maybe you're a climate nerd so you ask about an air source heat pump. The technician sighs and quotes you an exorbitant price because heat pumps are more expensive than gas furnaces but also because he's hoping it will dissuade you from asking for a one-off, complicated install.

We all face these unthinking non-choices everyday. The deck is stacked against change and what is seen as possible is constrained. Not just for individuals-the non-choices of governments, bureaucracies, bylaws, and communities continually reinforce the status quo. Climate impacts are baked in (pardon the pun) to almost everything we do: our cities are designed to move people by car and to automatically connect houses to a natural gas grid.

Growing, transporting, and shopping for food is also fuelled by oil and gas. Our financial system - your pension and bank account are almost certainly linked to the fossil fuel sector (though this thankfully may be changing).

Sociologist Gregory Unruh dubbed this carbon lock-in, the idea that much of our society, economy, and lives are built around the extraction and use of fossil energy. It is usually, literally, unremarkable.

Our committee is helping neighbours be more aware of possibilities, to spark people to think consciously about the range of choices and decisions they usually take for granted and venture into the unknown territory of change. But it's hard. We had to get creative to encourage people to fill out our survey. (Concerned about Climate Change? Fill out a Survey and Win a Pizza!) We celebrate when 100 people attend our webinars. These feel like baby steps in the face of the most serious existential crisis facing society - while the new Esso station hits the ground running.

The difficulty is by design

You've heard these arguments. You're to blame for climate change, we all are. You drive to work. You fly for vacation. You heat/cool your house to a comfy 22 degrees. Or my personal favourite: Of course, climate change is a problem and we should all be concerned, but we'll still need fossil fuels for a long time to come. I always imagine this last one delivered in a soothing, parental tone from a silver-haired executive in a crisp navy blue suit with a sharp red power tie and matching pocket square, maybe some striped socks to show he's not too uptight.

These arguments are ubiquitous. Geoffrey Supran and Naomi Oreskes from Harvard University figured out why. They arise, at least in part, from "fossil fuel industry propaganda" that blames climate change on demand for fossil fuels. Of course, this means that industry or governmental action are less legitimate and necessary. You (car driver, vacation taker, home heater) are the real cause of the problem; we (fossil fuel industry) just cater to your needs. It's on you.

So, the slog that our NetZero committee faces is not only a matter of wading through the inertia of everyday non-choices; the terrain we are trying to navigate was muddied on purpose with misleading ideas about responsibility. The fact that we need a neighbourhood NetZero committee is no accident. It is, in part, the fruit of a successful fossil fuel industry strategy that seeks to blunt large-scale, collective responses to climate change and focus attention on individual choices.

"We are passively guilty, born into a fossil fuel society. But companies like Exxon (Esso) are actively guilty for working to keep society the way it is," Supran told CNN when interviewed about his article. The title of the article? "Rhetoric and frame analysis of ExxonMobil's climate change communications."

And ... we're back to the shiny new Esso station in my neighbourhood.

Even as climate news worsens and the gulf between what needs to be done and what is being done too often feels uncrossable, there's hope. If you pay attention to climate news carefully, several data points are starting to form a pattern that looks like nascent momentum.

A growing wave of national and corporate net zero announcements headlined the Glasgow climate conference. There are reasons to be wary about how serious they are, but it is remarkable that having a net zero pledge is now normal.

Bans on new internal combustion engine cars are coming - Quebec (2035), the Netherlands (2030), Norway (2025).

Divestment movements demanding that pensions and other institutional investors move out of the fossil fuel sector are growing rapidly.

The usually cautious International Energy Agency says that no new fossil energy resources should be developed if we are to reach the goal of limiting warming to 1.5 C.

A strong, global social movement around climate justice, spearheaded by youth activists, is only growing stronger.

We've all learned too much about non-linear change in the time of COVID, when low case numbers balloon through exponential growth. The same thing can happen with the social change we need to tackle climate change, globally and locally. Slow, tentative steps suddenly accelerate. Neighbours talk to neighbours, information flows, examples emerge. Then, boom. Faster than an Esso station can go up, things shift - the baby steps of surveys, webinars, and conversations on front porches can be the precursors to a sprint to net zero.

We have to do the work though. We have to act like we're in a climate emergency. Talk to your friends and employers. Pressure your politicians. Vote. Join neighbourhood groups. March for climate. Change what you can in your life. Work to upend the status quo and replace it with something more just, more sustainable.

Like everyone else, the HVRA NetZero committee meets on Zoom now. We've grown. Twelve squares on my screen at our last meeting. We're buoyed by growing enthusiasm in the HVRA and beyond for our project and excited about next steps. We're building social capital and momentum that just might generate non-linear change in our little corner of the world. We still talk about flyers and email blasts ... but our work is contributing to a new ordinary that won't do us in. An ordinary where our new neighbourhood Esso station is obsolete.

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